

Something to Tide Us Over

Ian Rankin works even while he's resting

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

If you're a fan of crime fiction you're likely familiar with the symptoms: a vague discomfort, as though something's not quite right with the world; morphing into a feeling of actual unease, as you realize what it's down to: you haven't seen a new Rebus tome in some time. Your concern turns to panic. Is something wrong? Has Ian Rankin been kidnapped by terrorists – or worse, retired? Then you start search the net, wondering if somehow you'd simply managed to miss Rankin's most recent literary foray into the dark and fascinating world of Scottish crime.

At last you discover the truth. Last year was something of an hiatus for Rankin, when he made time to travel, pick grapes, write an introduction to Van Morrison's Selected Lyrics, captain a Scottish crime writers five-a-side football team against their English counterparts, and spend some well-earned time with his family, not necessarily in that order. At first you don't know whether to be relieved or annoyed; after all, doesn't the man realize his



obligation to legions of readers? Then, if you've been raised properly, your feelings are replaced by a sense of Christian charity: after all, the man has labored for decades, faithfully turning out some of the best crime fiction — nay, fiction of any stripe — out there. Then the full story hits you: never a man to rest on his laurels, Rankin has released a

volume of short stories to tide over those of us with addiction problems, including yours truly. The treasure trove spans Rebus's career, and contains nearly thirty stories, including two written especially for this collection. Scrambling to get a copy you quickly discover that he has not disappointed. Fans will take pleasure in tracing the development of the younger Sergeant Rebus as he steps into the shoes of the more mature Inspector Rebus: the rank may change, but the core of the man remains, in a fine assemblage of tales showcasing Rankin's trademark wit, both sly and dry, and capped by a revealing account of just how Rankin came to create his iconic protagonist. Along the way you'll see that – horrors! – Rankin almost became an accountant, and aspired to join the already-bloated ranks of punk rock musicians. But his love for a good tale, enhanced by the dark side of one of the world's great cities, combined to rescue him from these less noble fates.

The tales are as varied and nuanced as Rebus himself. An ex-army officer who isn't quite what he seems, has his car stolen, with deadly results; a smug little toe-rag of a villain who's been on Rebus's radar for years, seems ready to walk on a technicality; a Sunday visit from a fellow officer who's just killed a lad; being saddled

with a visiting member of the French *gendarmerie*, named Cluzeau, no less; a crossword puzzle that provides an insight into an elderly man's demise; and a career criminal who makes an art-form out of prison escapes. Each provides an insight into the varied and colourful world of John Rebus, one of the most intriguing and entertaining figures in crime fiction. And as always mood is paramount, with Rankin painting an eloquent picture of his inspired setting:

April meant still not quite spring in Edinburgh. A few sunny days to be sure, buds getting twitchy, wondering if winter had paid the ransom. But there was snow still hanging in a sky the colour of chicken bones. Office talk: how Rangers were going to retain the championship; why Hearts and Hibs would never win it – was it finally time for the two local sides to become friends, form one team which might – might – stand half a chance? As someone said, their rivalry was part and parcel of the city's make-up. Hard to imagine Rangers and Celtic thinking of marriage in the same way, or even of a quick poke on the back stairs.

Finally Rankin's well-known penchant for wordplay is not overlooked. Among his stories are *Being Frank*, *Concrete Evidence*, *Monstrous Trumpet*, *Window of*

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And now, the cherry on top. For those of us who simply cannot get their fill, Orion is releasing Rankin's 20th tale in the Rebus

canon in August of 2015. It brings together all the old favourites, including Siobhan Clarke and Ger Cafferty, and yes, I *will* be reviewing it when it is launched.

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Since 2005 Jim Napier's reviews and interviews have appeared in several Canadian newspapers and on various crime fiction and literary websites, including his own award-winning site, *Deadly Diversions*. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com

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